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IS OUR LITERATURE STILL ENGLISH?

When we ask the question, Is our literature still English? we tacitly admit, by the use of the word *still*, that heretofore our literature has been strikingly English. And the obvious fact which compels this admission is a great deal more surprising than it would, at first glance, appear to be.

We occasionally speak of England as our mother country, and we often refer loosely to ourselves as an Anglo-Saxon nation; but when we remember that America was first discovered by Norsemen and later by Italians and Spaniards; that from the very earliest Colonial times it has counted Dutch, Germans, Swedes, and French among important elements in its population; and that it now is the foster-mother of practically every race and nation under the sun—our words about our Anglo-Saxon origin and make-up lose much of their significance. In whatever sense England may have been our mother between 1607 and 1776, we have, in most respects, wandered far from the proverbial maternal apron-strings. Not content with our declaration of July 4, 1776, we have been declaring and re-declaring our independence in a hundred ways ever since. We have isolated and fortified ourselves with a Monroe Doctrine and a protective tariff; established an educational system which is more German than English, and more American than either; welcomed Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, Slav and Teuton, Celt and Latin, to our shores on equal terms. English conservatism and reverence for tradition; English caution and reticence; English pride in family trees; English patience and courtesy and gentleness—these are things which we Americans despise with almost vandalic aversion.

Yet the most cursory glance will show us that, so far as literature is concerned, we have been, throughout our colonial and national existence, remarkably English. It will convince us that the country which ruled us for a century and three quarters, and which gave us a permanent national language, has likewise insisted that we share with her a common literature. Our earliest American writers were nothing more nor less than English-

men sojourning in the new country, and they had precisely the same right to be termed *American*, as had Charles Dickens, when he wrote *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or Mr. Arnold Bennett, when he produced *Your United States*. Furthermore, nearly every American work ever published prior to the nineteenth century was written in New England or in Virginia. If one looks for the history of early Dutch literature in New York, early Swedish literature in Delaware, early German literature in Pennsylvania, or early French literature in the Middle or Southern states, one literally stares at blank pages. Our Colonial annals furnish no parallel to the French literature of Canada, the French and Italian literature of Switzerland, the Flemish literature of Belgium, the Polish literature of Russia, or the Slavonic literature of Austria-Hungary. Even when New England and the South ceased to have a monopoly on American authors, we still find practically all of our writing done by the descendants of Englishmen. The only great man of letters produced by Colonial Pennsylvania, for instance, was not a German; but Benjamin Franklin, a simon-pure New England Yankee. And if we look to Dutch New Jersey during the same period, we find a single noteworthy name, that of John Woolman, an English Quaker. Indeed, the only prominent non-British names to be found in American literature before the year 1800 are Philip Freneau and Hector St. Jean Crèvecoeur, and both these writers used the English language as their medium of expression.

Moreover, our early national literary history is but a repetition of the same old tale. During the first half century of our existence as an independent nation nearly one million aliens came to our shores, and of these newcomers a very large proportion were non-English-speaking people. From the very close of the Revolution to the present time, we have steadily grown less and less Anglo-Saxon in blood. But let us make a list of the chief American writers of the nineteenth century. Such list must include the names of Brown, Drake, Halleck, Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Alcott, Fuller, Emerson, Stowe, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Holmes, Prescott, Motley, Parkman, Taylor, Poe, Simms, Timrod, Hayne, Lanier, Stedman, Harte, Aldrich, Clemens, and Howells. Yet how many of these

thirty names would sound essentially foreign to a British ear? Absolutely none but the two names Lanier and Thoreau. And it should not be forgotten that the Laniers, though obviously of French origin, became thoroughly Anglicized by a long residence in England many generations before the birth of Sidney Lanier.

In view of these facts, is it any wonder that Andrew Lang made so bold as to regard our literature as a sort of colonial branch of English literature, belonging in the same category as the writings of Canada and Australia? Is it any wonder that Mr. John Macy, at the beginning of his *Spirit of American Literature*, dogmatically declares American literature to be "a branch of English literature, as truly as are English books written in Scotland or South Africa"?

In an article in *Harper's* for March, 1913, Professor Thomas R. Lounsbury calls attention to the prediction once made that the language of America would one day be markedly different from that of Britain. This prophecy seems now, in the light of actual history, as absurd as it must have seemed natural and plausible when it was made.

Several years ago on a transatlantic liner, the writer chanced to overhear an animated colloquy between a cocksure Englishman and a bumptious German-American. The Englishman, it appeared, had been trying to prove that America was indebted to the mother country for practically everything, from government to dinner-jackets. And the German-American was insistent that we owed practically nothing to England—not even our language. "We don't speak English," he declared; "we speak United States." "But, I say," replied the Englishman with quiet sarcasm, "your blooming United States, in spite of all its faults—its beastly burr and old-maid 'ants' and 'toons' and 'dooties'—is a jolly close imitation of English."

In the foregoing argument Percy certainly had the better of Hans. English, as our national vernacular, has come to stay. No thinking person doubts that now. And the past has indeed given us reason to wonder whether our literature may not be as permanently English as is our language. Yet the present is fraught with many new signs—many signs which make us persist in the query: Is our literature still English?

With a million foreigners entering our country annually (less than one-sixth of whom are natives of English-speaking territory); with fourteen per cent of our total population foreign-born; with an additional twenty-one per cent born of foreign parents; and with an overwhelming majority of our people partially or wholly Continental in descent, we have abundant reason to look for the outcropping of strikingly un-English traits in our literature.

Attention has been called to the dearth of non-British names among American authors, both Colonial and nineteenth-century. For the sake of comparison, it might be well to look at a few familiar contemporary American literary names—such names as Van Dyke, Repplier, Bynner, Guiterman, Cawein, Roosevelt, Oppenheim, Dreiser, Kauffman, Neihardt, Knoblauch, Santayana, Schauffler, Viereck, Benét, Hagedorn, and Untermeyer. Obviously, if there is anything in a surname, we Americans are no longer dependent solely upon Anglo-Saxons for our literature.

But we must get at more vital matters. We must see whether or not our literature itself is actually undergoing marked changes which tend to brand it as increasingly un-English. To reach any definite conclusions in this matter, we shall find it necessary to consider two things: subject-matter, and method of treatment.

Of course, it is very easy to point out that we have always had authors who have shown certain un-English characteristics, both in matter and in manner. For example, it is perfectly evident that such themes as the Indians of J. Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms, the prairies of Francis Parkman, the quaint Dutch-American characters of Washington Irving, and the fiery anti-slavery tirades of John G. Whittier could never have derived their inspiration from the British Isles. And to a close student, a subtle analyst, it is equally evident that the bald, bare moralizing which Longfellow, Whittier, and Lowell frequently indulged in would differentiate each of them sharply from any English Victorian poet. But, certainly, Indians and prairies are as typically Canadian as they are American, and the moralizing bent of our nineteenth-century New England bards may be traced directly to ancestors of pure English stock. More-

over, even when Washington Irving is dealing with Dutch-Americans, he is so patently Anglo-Saxon in his viewpoint that he might as well be an Englishman patronizingly interpreting the life and customs of Holland. Truly, the Anglophobe who surveys American literary history of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries finds scant cause for rejoicing.

Turning, now, from the past to the present, we must bear in mind that we are not concerned with the questions: Is our literature improving? or, Is our literature becoming more distinctively American? We are simply concerned with the query: Is our literature still *English*.

To the person who would answer this last-mentioned question affirmatively let me suggest a brief survey of backgrounds. Let me suggest a glance at the cosmopolitan East Side characters of the late Myra Kelly, the Jews of James Oppenheim, the Italians of T. A. Daly, the Pennsylvania Germans of Georg Schock and Helen R. Martin, the Louisiana French of George W. Cable, and the Michigan Dutch of Arnold Mulder. Here, surely, we have half a dozen backgrounds which are as un-English as they can be.

When we pass from subject-matter to technique, we are treading on dangerous ground; for we are raising a number of rather difficult questions. Can English literature be classed as a definite entity, sharply distinguished from the various kinds of Continental literature? Taking such catalogue as a criterion, can we find a sharp line of cleavage between English and American literature? If there is such thing as a distinctively Continental technique, is that technique followed more by non-English American writers than by American writers of prevaillingly English stock? Is a tendency to follow Continental methods necessarily resultant from the fact that the Continental elements in our population are becoming relatively stronger and stronger numerically?

It would be folly to declare that any of these questions can be answered with absolute finality; but one can, at least, bring forth certain facts which bear closely upon the questions.

In the first place, it is fairly safe to assert that there has been, in the history of the English literature, one period which may

be regarded as more typically English than any other. Assuredly, that period was not the Elizabethan period, with its strikingly un-English, almost Celtic exhilaration, volubility, lack of reticence. Nor was it the Jacobean period, with its strange, abnormal contrast to somber Puritanism and rollicking libertinism. Nor was it the Classical period, with its thoroughly un-English grossness, soullessness, artificiality, hatred of democracy, and contempt for nature. Nor, yet, was it the Romantic period, with its well-nigh Oriental delight in the wild, the remote, the improbable, the gaudy. It must, therefore, by the process of elimination, have been the Victorian period, that period during which the liberty-loving Anglo-Saxon race made its greatest developments along the lines of democracy.

How, then, may the Victorian period be characterized? What traits may be safely set down as typically Victorian? In attempting an answer, we shall do well to consider the poetry of that arch-Victorian, Tennyson, whom minor contemporaries followed to a remarkable degree, and with whom even Browning and the Pre-Raphaelites had much in common. Undeniably Tennyson—together with a clear majority of his fellow-Victorians—evinced such marked qualities as a correctness of form, a spirit of scientific accuracy, a tendency toward religious and philosophic questioning, a willingness for gradual change (change which broadens down “from precedent to precedent”), a distaste for things ugly or repulsive, a provincially English mental attitude, and a comparative indifference to the remote past. Add to these qualities the things which the three leading Victorian novelists, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, possessed in common: a thoroughly subjective point of view (in contradistinction to Continental objectivism); an accompanying tendency to intersperse one’s story with philosophic moralizing and general “editorial comment”; and, finally (in contrast to relentless Continental naturalism), a bent for tingeing all realism with the idealistic. And here you have the quintessence of Victorianism. Here you have certain definite strata which run through the English literature of all time, underlying the surface differences of Elizabethanism, Classicism, Romanticism, twentieth-century-ism, and so forth. Here you have a tolerably

correct differentiation of the literature of Britain from that of the Continent.

A comparison of English and American literature is now in order. At this point we encounter plenty of difficulties; for American literature is so heterogeneous, so sectional, so lacking in traits that are peculiarly national, that it defies a comprehensive definition. Nevertheless, our writers from New England to the Pacific coast, and from the Gulf of Mexico to the lakes, show a few common tendencies so marked that we have a certain criterion, after all. Take, for instance, the New England stories of Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, the Southern stories of Thomas Nelson Page, the New York stories of Edith Wharton, and the Western stories of Hamlin Garland and Owen Wister. Their striking objectivism will become entirely obvious, if we compare them with Victorian fiction, or if we compare them with the fiction of such present-day English writers as Mrs. Ward, Hewlett, De Morgan, Locke, and even Bennett. To be specific, note the difference between Mrs. Wharton's impartial, reportorial, objective way of telling a tale, and the impertinent comment which Thomas Hardy makes about the Immortals at the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Take the gloomy, over-sexed plays of Eugene Walter, of the late Clyde Fitch, and of numerous lesser American dramatists, and if you would find an English parallel to them, you will be almost obliged to turn to the problem plays of Sir Arthur Pinero,—who, by the way, is not a Briton at all, but the son of a Portuguese Jew. Take the "challenge" poetry of Louis Untermeyer, the whimsical poetry of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay and John Hall Wheelock, and the futurist poetry of Ezra Pound and all his ilk; and where shall you find anything approaching an English counterpart? Where, indeed? Perhaps in the buried annals of Pre-Raphaelitism; possibly, to a small degree, in Masfield, Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence; certainly not in such characteristic twentieth-century English poets as Kipling, Watson, Noyes, Binyon, Newbolt, Drinkwater, or Davies.

This brings us back to our third question: Is Continental technique followed more by non-English American writers than by American writers of prevailingly English stock? This, I should say, is a wellnigh futile question. Doubtless it is true

that Whitman, who was partly Dutch in blood, was far more Continental, far less English, in spirit and in method, than was Lowell, who was of pure Anglo-Saxon stock. But, on the other hand, it is equally true that Robert Herrick, a present-day writer of English descent, is essentially Continental in technique; whereas Henry Van Dyke, a contemporary of Dutch stock, has imbibed as much of the spirit of Victorian English literature as has perhaps any living American author.

Now we come to our final question: Is a tendency to follow Continental methods necessarily resultant from the fact that the Continental elements in our population are becoming relatively stronger and stronger numerically? Whether one answers this question affirmatively or negatively, one can at least assert that two facts stand out side by side: first, that the American race is much more Continental than it was fifty years ago; and secondly, that the same is true of American literature. The first of these two facts is a matter of simple figures; and as regards the second—it will scarcely be denied, for instance, that Hawthorne's *Arthur Dimmesdale* is far more English in temperament and in attitude toward life than is Theodore Dreiser's *Frank Calderwood*. And further support for this point will be found in what I have already indicated regarding the essentially English characteristics to be found in the work of such nineteenth-century American writers as Cooper, Simms, Parkman, Irving, Whittier, Longfellow, and Lowell; and the undeniably non-English characteristics evinced by such twentieth-century writers as Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Wharton, Garland, Wister, Fitch, Walter, Untermyer, Wheelock, Lindsay, and Pound.

I have made no attempt to show that our literature is either improving or becoming more distinctively American. Indeed, in an earlier paragraph I called attention to the fact that this was not the question under discussion in this paper. But the question is, after all, inevitable. A mere shifting of the matter and manner of American literature from the English to the Continental is of slight advantage or consequence if it does not augur a better literature for the future. The significant point, as I see it, is that a breaking away from servile dependence upon the literature of one particular European nation is surely a step

toward ultimate independence. If in the past our literature has been inherently English, and if at present it is partially English and partially Continental, there is no reason why in the future it may not be emphatically American.

History does not lack for the precedent of a nation which, depending upon an older nation's language, has nevertheless developed a distinctive literature of its own. There is the wonderful Greek pastoral poetry of ancient Sicily, and the splendid Greek prose of old-time Alexandria. There are the mediæval Latin writers of half a dozen European countries. There is a Maeterlinck, French in language, but unmistakably Belgian in race and spirit. There is a brilliant Norwegian literature, expressing itself in the Danish language, but, through the agency of such geniuses as Ibsen and Björnson, rising above the literature of Denmark itself. We need not hang our heads in shame because we have no American language. We need not fear that dependence in language will everlastingly preclude independence in literature. Surely this wonderful cosmopolitan nation of ours—in many respects the most original nation on the globe—cannot forever lack a literature distinctively its own; a literature of peculiar freshness and buoyancy, peculiar vigor and democracy.

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